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Woeste, Peter

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Peter Woeste

The World – an Old-Age Home

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Africa is commonly portrayed as the driver of a global “population explosion.” The new publication *Empty Planet* (2019) contests this prevailing view. Worldwide, it argues, the peak of the population increase will soon be reached and declining fertility will be the real problem for humanity, potentially in Africa too. The book’s thesis has received a great deal of attention. Rightly so?

- It’s the prevailing opinion: The world population will have increased to 11 billion by the turn of the century. *Empty Planet* gives minority opinions a platform. In 30 years the growth will tip, and the ageing population will become a significant problem around the world.
- In reality the authors are using previously known data, focusing only on the most optimistic population trends. And the most unpredictable element is how the African continent will develop. Will the global trends reach Africa as well, and if so, when? The elephant in the room is the European fear of migration. Their development policy is promoting a new incentive to convince African leaders to invest more in family planning: the promise of a demographic dividend. At the same time, more developed countries are trying to do the opposite: push up the fertility rate. They are failing.
- Furthermore, there is some food for thought. Why do almost all societies ultimately reach a fertility rate below the point of sustainability? How will shrinking populations affect individual societies and the power play of nations?
- Societies open to immigration may be able to cushion potential negative impacts. It’s worth looking more closely at the statistics on fertility rates: Most people will be surprised to see that fertility rates have almost collapsed in dozens of countries – and not just industrialised nations. There are impressive figures from Africa as well.

Policy Implications

Population growth is predicted to come to a peak at the end of this century, when the world’s fertility rates fall below reproduction. Whether the population growth culminates at 11 billion by 2100 or whether the tipping point is reached earlier depends on Africa. Shrinking populations in many other parts of the world may result in a shift in the international power play and economic difficulties in financing countries’ social infrastructure. Societies open to immigration will do better than those that are closed and isolated.



Dr. Peter Woeste

Diplomat in Residence and Fellow
peter.woeste@giga-hamburg.de

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien
Neuer Jungfernstieg 21
20354 Hamburg

www.giga-hamburg.de/giga-focus

We Might Be Lonely

We might be lonely. In 30 years, the publication *Empty Planet* (2019) predicts, the trend of a “global population explosion” will shift and the world’s population will begin to shrink. Africa, commonly portrayed as the driver of the increase in world population, will follow. Thus *Empty Planet* contests this prevailing view. The world’s population will continue to shrink unchecked. With this thesis, the Canadians Darrell Bricker, the CEO of Ipsos Public Affairs, a polling, research, marketing, and analysis company, and John Ibbitson, a journalist at Canada’s national daily *The Globe and Mail*, shake up the familiar view that the world’s population is increasing unabatedly. They argue that overpopulation will not be the problem, but rather an ageing population and a shrinking economy. This theory is not at all new, but as a minority opinion it has not received much attention in the past. And some of its earlier proponents might be considered biased. The German Catholic News Agency headlined one article with: “UN admits for the first time: Population explosion is a myth” (n.d.). Thanks to an easy-to-read non-fiction title, the authors received a great deal of attention from weekly magazines. This is particularly intriguing as the book seems to offer a simple solution to a major problem.

Bricker and Ibbitson’s thesis comes at a time when foreign policy is broaching the topic of population development – at least more openly – for the first time. The proverbial elephant in the room is the subject of migration. The prevailing popular belief is that Africa is threatening to flood Europe. It is alleged that 37 per cent of Africans want to leave their home countries, approximately two-thirds of them in the direction of Europe. And it does not get better. At the end of the century, the United Nations expects a world population of 10.9 billion people, an increase of 42 per cent (UN 2019), with growth focused in the countries of our southern neighbours.

Therefore, foreign policy no longer considers questions of family planning to be a niche subject that can be left to specialists in development cooperation – where it has hitherto been only one of many topics. In the past, diplomats have tried to avoid this contentious issue, which is peppered with ethical and religious traps. The argument that the much higher resource consumption of the rich is a greater threat than high birth rates lurks in each panel discussion. The right to reproductive autonomy is a universal human right, though in context it refers above all to the right to family planning – including information about contraception.

In 2019, the German Federal Foreign Office commissioned the Berlin Institute for Population and Development to undertake a study on the topic of population growth in Africa (Kaps, Schewe and Klingholz 2019). This is a clear sign that it is no longer seen as a distant development policy issue, but is affecting Germany’s foreign and security interests. The question is how to seek a soft and attractive, inoffensive broaching of the topic. The study offers a wealth of interesting aspects and is visually skilful thanks to numerous graphics. After *Empty Planet* has captured your attention, it’s a helpful tool to think transversely.

According to *Empty Planet*, salvation appears to be close. The population bomb as predicted in the late 1960s by Anne and Paul Ehrlich (1968) is just an illusionary giant. The authors effectively counter all doomsday scenarios. Instead they paint the picture of a nursing home for the elderly 50 years from now. This deftly written and well-promoted book received significant attention from fellow journalists in the

United States. German journalists, as attentive readers of American publications always in search of a good story, took up the new topic. How much truth is there in the heretical claim that not too many children, but rather too many seniors, are the problem of the future?

It All Depends on How a Statistic Is Read

Who has been drawing the wrong conclusions from the statistics, the theorists of the population explosion or those of the population implosion? Cynics may note that the common link in both scenarios is the downfall of humanity.

Almost all scenarios assume that the growth of the world's population is finite. It is just the question of when the peak will be reached that is contentious. The starting point of all calculations is the acceptance that the current population in 2019 is 7.7 billion people, as calculated by the UN (2019). It is also undisputed that it is above all the African continent that will drive future growth: its population is expected to double to 2.6 billion by 2050. But how do we read the tea leaves for the second half of the century?

UN statistics expect the inflection point to occur around the year 2100 at a population of approximately 11 billion. When they recently adjusted their numbers slightly downwards to just under 11 billion, critics celebrated this as an admission of failure. In sharp contrast to this are the authors of *Empty Planet* and their sources, who expect the vertex to occur between 2040 and 2060 at approximately nine billion and predict a return to today's numbers by the end of the century. The driving factor is said to be urbanisation, followed by the combination of education and access to contraceptives (Empty Planet 2019).

However, it is interesting that the authors overlook the fact that the UN has also prepared an array of future developments – and in the end settled on the middle scenario as the most probable one, with a peak in population development at 11 million by the turn of the century. More and less promising versions are not concealed.

Grabbing Attention via Dramatisation

The authors of *Empty Planet* use the methods of journalistic dramatisation. The readability and interestingness of the subject benefit from exaggeration, at the expense of scientific accuracy and validity. The book's weaknesses extend to the point of it being unreliable. At no point is there a graphic. The numbers are difficult to compare. Sometimes work is carried out in detail (for example, regarding the positive figures for Kenya), and sometimes basic data is missing (so there is no overall African forecast for 2050 or 2100). There have been other, previous reports predicting population decline. In 2013 a report for Deutsche Bank (Sanyal 2013) argued that "urbanization is the strongest contraceptive" and that we can expect the human fertility rate to fall to replacement figures by 2025. Critics of *Empty Planet* and its sources stress that these estimates have already proven to be too positive just six years later, if one believes the World Bank figures (World Bank 2019).

There are many engaging moments for the amateur reader. *Empty Planet* opens the reader's eyes to a potentially different viewpoint – for instance, a historical per-

spective. This is particularly so for the baby boomers (the post-war generation up to the “pill gap” of the 1960s), who are about to retire but are still decision makers. Their focus on their own uniqueness makes them blind to the realisation that the baby bust has actually been a slip-up of an already declining fertility rate, a decline over 200 years – at least in parts of Europe such as France, where it was not possible to speak of urbanisation in the eighteenth century.

The UN does not hide the fact that more than half of humanity today lives in states where the fertility rate is below the reproductive rate of 2.1. These countries include some of the former drivers of growth: China, Brazil, and South Korea, and soon India and Indonesia. The population in each of these states is still growing, but only because the younger people are having children, while the elderly enjoy increased life expectancy. *Empty Planet* focuses more closely on these facts and brings endless columns of pre-existent statistics to life. Even if one does not agree with the authors’ conclusion, this makes the book worth reading.

The Carrot for Africa – Do Not Miss the Demographic Dividend

The critical point of all these theories is the question of how population development affects the economy. Do more people result in more consumers, and thus in more growth? This is the old capitalist thinking, as if *The Limits to Growth* (1972) had never been published. This old-school thinking is represented by a number of African leaders as well. Not all of them are as outspoken as Tanzania’s president, John Magafuli. He refers, not unjustly, to his experience from visits to Europe, where governments are trying in vain to counteract the shrinking of their populations. President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda makes a similar argument. Many others simply do not want to offend foreign donors by being too explicit on the issue. On the other hand, not many are as aggressive as Rwanda’s President Paul Kagame, who rules a country with the highest population density in the world (519 people per square kilometre). He decided in 2012 to commit his government to family planning and has accelerated these measures over the intervening years.

Even if fertility rates drop, population growth will continue for at least some decades. Take the example of Rwanda, with 13 million people at present. People are living longer and the parents of the 20 millionth citizen of the year 2040 have already been born.

In the transition phase from a lower birth rate to a shrinking society, the prevailing opinion in science promises a “demographic dividend.” This refers to the time when the population pyramid will shift its big belly from its very bottom to the young workers in their twenties, while at the bottom, with the newest generation, it will already be tapering off. More breadwinners and fewer dependents should generate a development window not to be missed by the African states. Asia sets the role model here.

The idea of demographic change describes current development in Southeast Asia. There is no proof yet that it might automatically repeat itself in Africa. There, the young working-age population (between 15 and 35 years old) is growing by up to 12 million people per year, while only about three million new formal jobs are being created. Low life prospects, on the other hand, accelerate population growth.

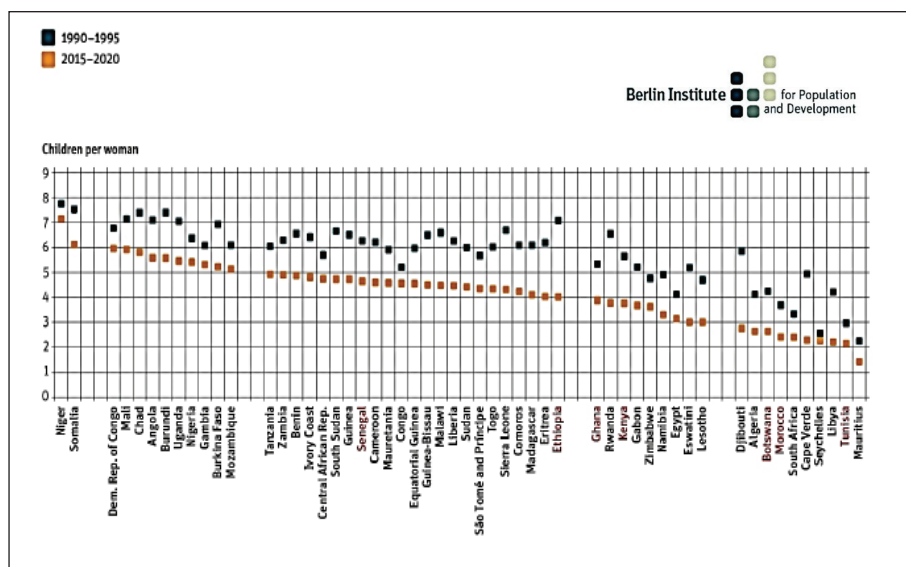


Fig. 1
Average number of children per woman, 1990-1995 and 2015-20120

Source: UN DESA; Kaps, Schewe, and Klingholz (2019).

The reduction in the fertility rate in most African countries is remarkable. The general direction is a trend towards lower fertility rates. But there are doubts as to whether this will result in a demographic dividend. The condition for this is that there is also work for these young people. Yet just because there is a surplus of working people does not mean that it will automatically create work for them. Is this too pessimistic? Take the example of Tunisia, at present the most hopeful of all African candidates for a demographic dividend – if it is considered to be African at all. The country has achieved the economically favourable age structure of the demographic bonus. “But currently the country is far from being able to harness this potential; like almost everywhere in Africa, there are insufficient jobs for the large number of people of working age” (Kaps, Schewe, Klingholz 2019), admit the experts at the *Berlin Institute for Population and Development*.

As yet the theory of a demographic dividend for the African continent remains speculation without proof. But it is the only argument that development experts have discovered so far in trying to convince hesitant rulers to commit to family planning. It might be considered a hypocritical argument from the perspective of a small developing country.

Hence the African chapter is the weak point of any thesis on a quick change in the development of the world’s population. Five of the nine countries that will contribute most to population growth by 2050 are located in Africa: Egypt, Nigeria, DR Congo, Ethiopia, and Tanzania. Over the next 30 years, half of the world’s population growth will be in Africa.

But the authors of *Empty Planet* expect that the trends from Europe, North and South America, and Asia will also be repeated in Africa. Indeed, they even rely on accelerated development. The UN, they say, is too pessimistic. However they do not provide evidence of this fact, only extrapolation of the previous trend. Unfortunately, the empirical figures support the opposite trend: “Fertility rates in Africa are sinking much more slowly than in other parts of the world” and “child numbers remain at a high level,” the authors of *Africa’s Demographic Trailblazers* state (Kaps, Schewe, Klingholz 2019).

Particularly with regard to the African continent, there is no lack of doom-day apologists. Take Serge Michailof in his *Africanistan – Development or Jihad* (2018): he considers major geopolitical and development issues to have the poten-

tial to impact Europe's and the world's stability. To him, Africa is a powder keg – with demographics as the powder, and unemployment the detonator.

Empty Planet's projection appears even more speculative: As the bulk of the population slips into retirement age, the economy will shrink. The worst case for many African countries would be to reach this recession without enjoying the demographic dividend first. This result is one that none of the recent publications dare to discuss.

To Be a Big Player, Population Size Matters

Foreign policy-makers may look at population changes from different perspectives. How do changing fertility rates affect the international power play? Of course, the size of a country's population is not the only factor determining its international role – even if it is sometimes neglected as a major one. Let us apply a one-generation perspective – until the year 2050 – on the basis that size matters and economic growth needs a strong domestic market.

If this assumption is correct, Russia, one of the premier league players, is facing an additional problem to secure its position as it is already experiencing a declining population, with a birth rate of 1.7 children per woman. The UN (2019) expects Russia's population to drop to 132 million in 2050 from 143 million today. China's population (birth rate: 1.6 children per woman) is expected to shrink from today's 1.4 billion by 100 million people, a trend that will accelerate and not be cushioned by migration as most Asian countries do not enjoy the tradition of an immigration policy. At present, China is a perfect example that the demographic dividend exists – but by 2050 it will pay the price for an ageing society.

The beneficiary might be an old player on the field, the US. Although it enjoys only a slightly higher birth rate per woman (1.9) than its competitors, its uninterrupted immigration rates mean that the domestic market should continue to see increasing demand from young buyers. The US position would therefore not be endangered. It is not possible to predict how shrinking states will react in terms of foreign and economic policy, but the domestic situation should not be disregarded.

Among the players of the second division, Japan seems particularly at risk of descent. For two decades, Tokyo has not managed to revive the economy, despite a zero interest rate policy. If one believes the theories of *Empty Planet*, the cause lies in the country's population structure. For 30 years, the fertility rate has fallen below the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman – mostly to 1.4 (UN 2019). Already, Japan is the oldest society on earth – with all the accompanying, and expensive, consequences thereof for its social system. Japan has been shrinking since 2010 – perhaps not coincidentally at the same time it had to give up its place as the world's second-largest industrial nation to China.

Germany has been given temporary respite thanks to immigration. Regarding births per woman, despite a rise to 1.5 (UN 2019) it is still below the European Union average. Remarkably, especially those EU partners most opposed to immigration have even lower birth rates (Hungary 1.4; Poland 1.3). France leads with 1.9, and the United Kingdom is still growing – thanks to immigration and not taking into consideration that London is currently scoring an own goal thanks to Brexit. Canada is

most likely to compensate for low birth rates (1.6), and thanks to a long-term immigration policy might be one of the future climbers.

What of the shooting stars and newcomers: the Asian tigers and the remaining BRICS nations? It is interesting to read which countries already have fertility rates well below 2.1 (UN 2019): Singapore, Macau, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea have among the lowest birth rates in the world, with the city states currently accounting for the lowest. Other nations that are likely to surprise many readers are Brazil at 1.7 children, South Africa at 2.4, and India at 2.3. They could be candidates for the demographic dividend, as is the case in South Korea and China. India and Brazil appear to be potential candidates for a bigger international role, as the baby boomers of the past are fuelling the economy, and the burdens of retirement are not yet palpable. However, population control alone might not be enough to kick them into the major league.

There is not much news from the Middle East in this regard. The prediction (UN 2019) is that population growth has slowed down already – with the exception of Egypt. And the resource-rich countries of the region are building their future on factors that are beyond the question of whether a demographic dividend exists.

Germany could stabilise its position with a clever immigration policy. The situation could be worse.

Influencing Birth Rates

There is something missing in all the studies, projections, and research on population growth. It is the statisticians, the physicians, the sociologists, and the political scientists who deal with the issues of population development. The field lacks the views of biologists and behavioural researchers. Is *Homo sapiens* so different from its fellow creatures that it will self-destructively allow either uncontrollable growth or a shrinkage to zero? Do all the factors mentioned by the development experts – from education to urbanisation – describe the whole picture? It might be that a piece of the puzzle is missing that could explain why all the efforts – be it to increase or reduce human fertility – have not been more successful.

To discuss the theory and implications of a shrinking world population, one does not have to be a member of the *Flat Earth Society* or in denial of the climate crisis. From the range of possible developments, the book *Empty Planet* has picked an interesting – and the most positive – of all possible scenarios – as long as the negative drama of the associated ageing is ignored. This does not exclude the possibility that the authors picked the correct scenario; any reputable work of science fiction is based on good research. But that is fiction, not science. It is not a scenario that politicians can base their decisions on. The population is growing now, especially in Europe's neighbourhood, in Africa. And although we do not fully understand the systematic causal chain, at least some of the elements appear obvious: give girls education and give women easy access to contraceptives, then let them take their own decisions. Only if that works will the human species have the luxury of reflecting on business and power in its old-age home, Earth.

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About the Authors

Dr. Peter Woeste is a career diplomat with 30 years of experience at the German Federal Foreign Office. Before joining the GIGA he served as ambassador to Rwanda and Malawi, with Mongolia, South Africa, and the German representation to the UN in New York among his previous foreign postings. His research focuses on Africa, and the question of how German strategies for development cooperation could be more efficient. He studied in Marburg and Lausanne, holds a PhD in Law from Philipps-Universität Marburg, and is a fully qualified lawyer.

peter.woeste@giga-hamburg.de; www.giga-hamburg.de/en/team/woeste

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GIGA | Neuer Jungfernstieg 21
20354 Hamburg
www.giga-hamburg.de/giga-focus
giga-focus@giga-hamburg.de

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Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien